ESSAY / RELIGION

The Hindu Hoax

How upper castes invented a Hindu majority

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During a religious ceremony marking the inauguration of the construction of the Rama temple, the prime minister, who heads the government of a country with a secular constitution, participated in the religious ritual, acting like a priest. PIB

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TODAY, IN INDIA, nearly all media have been co-opted into "Hindu nationalism," which appears to be virtually the only permissible perspective on politics. According to this perspective, "Hindu" is both an ancient religion and an ethnic group mythically born with it, thus making "Hindus" the eternal natives of India. This political project seeks to return India to an ahistorical past in which Hindus were supposedly free of external "*mlechcha*," or impure, mixtures—from the ancient Greeks to the European colonial powers.

Many enthusiastic political observers recently claimed that the "Hindu state" has been in effect since 5 August 2020, when the construction of a Rama temple was inaugurated with a religious ceremony. The temple is being constructed on land in Ayodhya, previously known as

Faizabad, where there once stood a sixteenth-century mosque. The mosque was demolished in 1992 by a mob assembled by leaders of Hindu organisations, including the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. In the ceremony, which was televised by every major news channel, the prime minister, who heads the government of a country with a secular constitution, participated in the religious ritual, acting like a priest. The event—in which the constitutional and the theocratic were confused with each other—was held on that particular date for a reason.

Exactly a year earlier, on 5 August 2019, the BJP government revoked Article 370 of the Constitution, which had provided a certain level of autonomy to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. The government increased deployment of troops in the region, suspended civil liberties, severely restricted communication systems and suppressed any attempts at protest. Since the government began cracking down on protests after the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2019, similar measures of repression are now unfolding in the rest of India. The government, in its many public demonstrations of religious and caste bias, and now in conjoining the executive and the ceremonial priest, has rejected the foundational principles of the Constitution. The Constitution is a contract, a democratic promise which all those who would become Indian made to one another theoretically. We have now witnessed the manifest surrender of this promise.
And yet, despite its apparent dominance, the project to impose a Hindu religious identity on the people, the country and the state is unsustainable, and has been challenged since its inception.

In the early days of modern political organisation of the subcontinent, in the mid nineteenth century, two distinct political destinies became discernible rather than one destiny, that tryst hailed by Nehru. These two political projects, from the very beginning, have been mutually incompatible, and they would have likely unfolded into two very different kinds of polity. One sought the continuation of caste-based organisation under the supremacy of the upper castes; the other

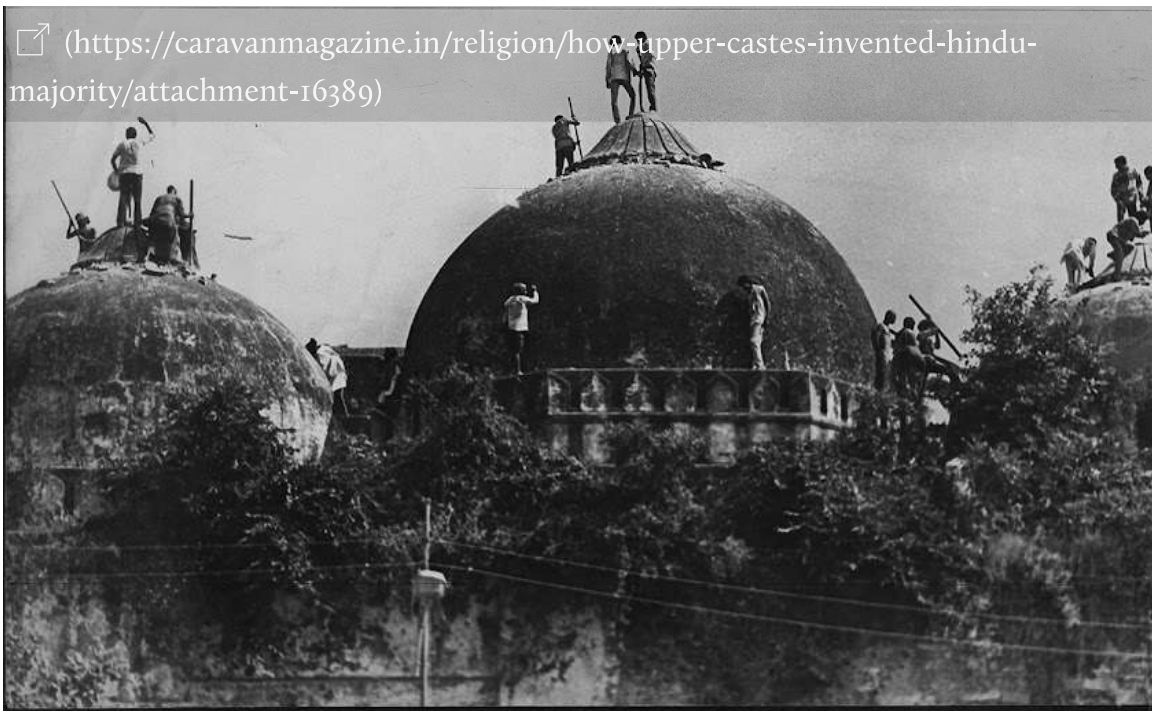
imagined genuine independence in the form of an egalitarian society free of caste and gender discrimination. The former, which has now gained apparent ascendency through the promotion of Hindu nationalism, can be represented in the figure of the politician Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The latter is represented by an unparalleled genius of political thought and an indefatigable activist, Jotirao Phule, and all upper-caste platforms, including the Congress, have sought to suppress it.

Phule led the first modern emancipatory project for lower castes, in the nineteenth century. He analysed their social and economic conditions and established a proliferating network of institutions for education, social work and relief. In 1873, he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj, or the truth-seekers' society, which denounced the caste order and rejected the need for priests, idolatry and complex rituals. In the early twentieth century, Phuleites emerged as a major political force in Maharashtra, where they challenged and effectively dethroned the anti-women's liberation, pro-caste Brahmin orthodoxy and inhibited its political ambitions for a significant while.

Tilak and his followers were at the origin of the Hindu political project, which was to be defined strictly in keeping with the Brahminical world view. Tilakites were strenuously opposed to the liberation of the lower castes and of women from the caste order. They rejected everything that they considered foreign, including Muslims, who had been living on the Indian subcontinent for more than a thousand years. The Tilakite project used and subverted modern democratic norms and juridical systems, which arrived and developed with British colonial rule, a phenomenon that continues at an accelerated pace under the current regime.

These two destinies began to have their closest encounter in the political theatre of the 1980s and 1990s. The Mandal commission, which was tasked to determine the number of people of the backward castes and suggest reservation policies for them, submitted its report in 1980. The Congress governments of the time did not find it necessary to implement the recommendations of the report. Instead,

Rajiv Gandhi, who became prime minister following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, would open the gates of the Babri mosque for Hindu nationalists to worship inside it.



In order to understand the reasons why the demolition of the Babri mosque coincided with implementation of the Mandal commission report, it is necessary to understand the conflict between the two ideological destinies of modern India. SANJAY SHARMA / HINDUSTAN TIMES

In August 1990, the coalition government led by VP Singh began the process to implement the Mandal commission's report, a decision opposed by most mainstream political organisations, including the Congress and communist parties. Soon after, in September 1990, the BJP and other affiliates of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh began a motorised chariot procession, with LK Advani as its face, from the Somnath Temple to the Babri mosque, demanding to erect a temple in place of the mosque. On 16 November 1992, implementation of the Mandal report officially began after a Supreme Court bench upheld the position taken by the VP Singh government. Within three weeks, on 6 December, the Babri mosque was demolished by a mob that was part of the motorised chariot procession. A Congress-led government was in power at the centre. In September 2020, a trial court declared 32 individuals accused of involvement in the demolition, including Advani and other leaders, not guilty.

The Congress and the BJP are both part of the same Tilakite project that has dominated India's national politics since Independence. In order to understand the reasons why the demolition of the Babri mosque coincided with implementation of the Mandal commission report, it is necessary to understand the conflict between the two ideological destinies of modern India. To understand the acceptance by nearly all political parties of the aftermath of the demolition, including the Babri land-dispute judgment and the rituals broadcast live, it is necessary to uncover that which is hidden by the term Hindu.

Almost all political parties in the past three decades have purported to distinguish "Hinduism" from "Hindutva," and expounded on the need to protect religious minorities from "Hindu majoritarianism." It has thus served the interests of all political parties, including the Congress, to hide the meaning of "Hindu."

While much attention has been paid to Hindu nationalists' treatment of those they construct as enemies—the religious minorities of India, especially the Muslims—less has been written about the hoax of Hinduism. The definition of "Hindu" lacks objective reality and runs contrary to recent scholarship in various disciplines. The religion has been used to suppress and control the political aspiration of the oppressed castes, who were slipped into the Hindu religious category in the last century without consultation. By adopting this recently invented religious category as the identity of the majority, the Hindu nationalists led by the Brahminical RSS have been able to claim that they represent the majority. In this way, the upper castes are able to exercise political power in a modern constitutional democracy and distort the history and everyday reality of caste oppression in the subcontinent. The popular understanding of "Hinduism" and the self-perception of the majority of lower-caste people in the subcontinent has also changed to an extent over the last century due to the more or less silent acceptance of this term by some historians, intellectuals and the media.

While it is claimed to be an ancient religion, there is wide academic consensus that Hinduism is a fairly recent invention. For a belief

system to be given the designation of a religion, it needs to be understood as one by the state and also by a group of people that share that belief system. In the case of Hinduism, it is only in the early twentieth century that the British government tried to define a criteria for who could be considered a Hindu. Till then, the British officials had used Hinduism as a term of convenience, having inherited it from Christian missionaries who used it as a negative concept—to identify those who were neither Christians, Jews nor Muslims.

As Lewis McIver, a British civil servant, wrote in the 1881 Madras Census Report: "Regarded as a definition of religion, or even of race, it is more liberal than accurate. From the point of view of race, [the term Hinduism] groups together such widely distinct peoples as true Aryan Brahmins and the few Kshatriyas we possess, with the Vellalas and Kallars of the South, the Nairs of the West, and the aboriginal tribes of the Southern hill sides. As a religious classification it lumps the purest surviving forms of Vedic belief with the demon worshippers of Tinnevelly and South Canara."

Along with his wife, Savitribai, Jotirao Phule became an early proponent for the education of India's oppressed communities, such as Dalits,Shudras and women. He led the first

modern emancipatory project for lower castes. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A 1921 report by a census commissioner of British India reads, “No Indian is familiar with the term ‘Hindu’ as applied to his religion.” Till the end of the nineteenth century, there were only a few upper-caste Indians, educated in the English language, who were identifying themselves as part of the Hindu religion. Since it is only in the last century that “Hindu” came into existence as a legible term for both the state and the larger population, especially the majority lower castes on whom it was imposed, it can be proven that the “Hindu religion” is a twentieth-century invention. The dominant upper-caste communities, for a large part of the subcontinent’s history, identified themselves and others not by one’s religion, but by individual castes, and the rising caste atrocities today show that this fact has not changed. Initially, they opposed being gathered into a single category along with the lower-caste people, whom they considered inferior and untouchable.

It is the early twentieth century that saw India’s predominantly upper-caste nationalist leaders adopt the Hindu religion as a political project, explicitly and strategically. The Congress of Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru did not question the unifying category, not least because it would have meant having to share political power with the oppressed-caste majority. Subsuming them under the category of “Hindu” allowed the upper castes to represent them. The transfer of power from the British during the late 1940s thus concentrated power in the hands of this dominant-caste elite.

Other upper-caste leaders took on the Hindu project more unabashedly. The Baniya leader of the Arya Samaj, Lala Lajpat Rai, and the Brahmin leader of the orthodox Sanatana movement, Madan Mohan Malviya, came together in 1915 to form the Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu-nationalist political party that was the predecessor of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and the BJP. In 1925, Keshav Baliram Hegdewar, a member of the Mahasabha, founded the RSS, an organisation dedicated to propagating the Hindu identity.

Throughout the twentieth century, upper-caste leaders have tried to create a Hindu constituency, through assimilation and appropriation of lower-caste people. They have tried to create a homogeneity of religious beliefs, through the promotion of gods worshipped by the dominant castes and the obliteration of the traditions of the lower castes. Heinrich von Stietencron, a German Indologist, speaks of the "colonisation of India" by the gods and goddesses of the upper castes from the northwestern provinces and notes that "the continuing process of Hinduization of local deities could be cited from several parts of India."

This project could also be described as an ethnocide in the name of religious reform. The cultural practices of tribes and oppressed castes have changed drastically. For example, in Odisha, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the longstanding traditional deities such as Maari Amman, Bhuāsuni, Maninā geśvarī, Mādan and Thampurān have been displaced by the "the great Hindu gods" such as Shiva and Durga. Temple-entry programmes were created, which increased temple revenues in many parts of India.

Whenever the tensions between castes became detrimental to the interests of the upper castes, these conflicts were deflected to create religious riots. Caste riots have often culminated in Hindu-Muslim violence. Muslims have been constructed as a common enemy to distract lower-caste people from demanding social justice from the dominant castes. The construction of a false "Hindu" religion created a false Hindu majority, which suppressed the fact that the lower-caste people were the real majority with political aspirations. Muslims and other religious minorities are victims of the Hindu hoax.

Beneath the veneer of reforming a recently invented religion, the upper castes exercise their power over the majority lower-caste people. Even today, Dalits are murdered for entering temples, marrying outside their caste or for "polluting" water. Their own wells are poisoned as punishment. Dalit women are raped as a reminder of upper-caste authority. India's oppressed castes and tribes have been denied representation in all forms of public life—politics, business,

media, the judiciary and so on. Oppressed-caste leaders have led several political movements seeking reform, representation and an end to discrimination.

The struggle between these two political destinies—the dominant castes' attempt to hold on to their millennia-old supremacy in society through the rhetoric of Hindu unity and the oppressed castes' battle for emancipation from the caste order—has shaped India's modern history.

An anonymous ancient deity in the Pulakotta Sasta shrine in Perumbavur, Kerala. In Odisha, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the longstanding traditional deities such as Maari Amman, Bhuāsuni, Maninageśvarī, Mādan and Thampurān have been displaced by the "the great Hindu gods" such as Shiva and Durga. AJAY SEKHER

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THE FIRST USE of the term "Hindu" can be traced back to the sixth century BCE, when Achaemenid Persians used it to refer to the geographical region around the Indus River—also known as the

Sindhu—in the northwest of the subcontinent. According to the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam, this term was never used for the land beyond the Deccans. The literature compiled as the Vedas was composed from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, by a people who called themselves "Aryan" and had migrated to the subcontinent from the Eurasian Steppe region. The ancient text Manusmriti prohibited the migrant Aryans from crossing the Vindhya mountains in central India.

In the fourth century BCE, Alexander's army referred to the region around the "Sindhu" by the name Indus, from which the modern name "India" is derived. The Arabic variant "Al Hind," too, referred to the same geographical region, and it is from this term that "Hindu" came into usage. The historian Richard Eaton has written that the word had been in use till 1350 as a vague geographical notion for a portion of the subcontinent.

According to Romila Thapar, "Hindu" was never used to denote a religion before the fifteenth century. The earliest use of the term to designate a religion of its own was in the eighteenth century by the civil servants and merchants of the East India Company.

All these varying uses show that the use of the term "Hindu" in historiography does not have any criteria for its usage before the nineteenth century. Even in the nineteenth century, it was only used when speaking of the political and administrative processes through which its adoption began in small measures under the colonial government.

Belief in god or gods, the questioning of the existence of god and piety can exist in isolation from society and politics. But a belief system is classified as a religion when the behaviour of a large number of people is controlled in order to ensure its regularity across distances and across time, in the form of taboos and rituals. A sacred calendar ensures the group conduct is repeated year after year. Religion is inseparable from the power structures which provide it unquestionable legitimacy through regulating "belief." Religion

requires consistent exercise of political power to ensure uniformity and regularity for religious beliefs and practices.

To speak of a religion, then, is to speak of something with sufficiently distinct traits and with a definite population adhering to it within a political system. The very fact that societies are invested in the difference between "religion," "sect" and "cult" shows the managerial and political character of these classifications because to be one or the other carries consequences in civil law. Even having a distinct set of beliefs and practices, such as in Scientology or Dinkoism, is immaterial unless the political system bestows formal recognition based on criteria formally established. In India, we can witness the challenges faced by Lingayats to gain the status of a religion for their beliefs.

In Europe, from where our present concern with religion arrived, "religion," "nation" and "race" were used interchangeably in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With the post-Columbian discovery of non-European peoples and their customs, Christian theologians became concerned with the possibility of multiple religions and with what true religion was. For a long time, it was held that Christianity alone was religion, or true religion. These attempts to define religion and distinguish between the practices of different groups gained importance beyond theological debates when the state adopted religion as a category in administrative matters. Descriptive categories became salient for state legislations—for instance, the racist Code Noir regulated marriage and property relations between Jews, Christians and slaves in the French Empire. Thus, a need arose to determine the religions of various groups and for the state to recognise and count and administer them accordingly.

European missionaries who arrived on the subcontinent during the Mughal era believed there were four religions in the world—Christianity, Islam, Judaism and the beliefs and practices of the Gentiles. While they noted the differences among the religious traditions of the subcontinent, all those who did not worship the god of Christianity, Islam and Judaism were considered devil-worshipping Gentiles, also known as heathens. Spanish missionaries studied the

diverse practices of polytheism, idol worship and the caste order, which they already believed formed one religion called Gentile, which soon became "Gentoo."

Early British orientalists picked up the word. In the early 1770s, the governor-general of Bengal, Warren Hastings, commissioned a group of Brahmins to select and compile a legal code from the Sanskrit "shasters," or shastras, and had it translated into the more accessible Persian, and then from Persian into English. The idea was that the non-Muslim populations be administered in civil matters by this code. In 1776, the British orientalist Nathaniel B Halhed completed the English translation and published it as *A Code of Gentoo Laws; or, Ordinations of the Pundits.*

These varied uses do not imply that either the religion, or the peoples corresponding to it, were in existence. Most European travellers' records from the period of Mughal rule and from the early days of colonial administration show that they were aware of and concerned only with the religious conventions of the upper castes, especially Brahmins. Since the European colonialists' intermediaries were often Brahmins, the beliefs of Brahmins were often mistaken as being representative of the religion of the gentiles.

Why a pan-India religion did not have its provenance before the arrival of the British in the subcontinent is a matter to consider. There are several reasons, of which the most significant is that the caste order is dependent on excluding certain people from sexual, social and cultural practices reserved for others. There is no evidence, even today, of a concept which identifies the people of various castes, sects and tribes of the subcontinent as belonging to one religious group. As the historian Sandria B Freitag wrote in a 1980 essay, "Always have Indians identified themselves by their caste." In other words, the only invariant in the Indian subcontinent is caste oppression.

A Lingayat community protest in Solapur in 2018, demanding independent religion status. The very fact that societies are invested in the difference between "religion," "sect" and "cult" shows the managerial and political character of these classifications, because to be one or the other carries consequences in civil law. PTI

Caste was the organisational principle that grouped and segregated people in the subcontinent. In the pre-colonial era, Brahmins and other upper castes treated the majority lower-caste people as mlechcha and *dharmahina*, or people devoid of dharma. Hence, from the point of view of caste, an inclusive conception of one religion for all the people would have been unthinkable.

Regardless, British scholars continued to use the word Hindu to describe the religion of people of India, when, in fact, they were only referring to the cultural practices and codes of dominant castes. HH Wilson, an orientalist and metallurgist posted in Calcutta for mining operations in Bengal, created a Sanskrit dictionary in 1819 that mentioned "Hindu" but did not use it in the sense of a religion. In 1827, Wilson published *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus*,

where “Hindu” referred to the non-Islamic peoples and cultures housed in the subcontinent. He gave two lectures on “the sects” of the subcontinent, published in 1840 as *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*, where he seems to describe distinct but related sects and beliefs. Even this collection of sects largely belonged to dominant-caste groups such as the Vaishnavas, Saivas and Pasupathas. In nineteenth-century usages of the term “Hindu,” one predominantly finds description of upper-caste beliefs.

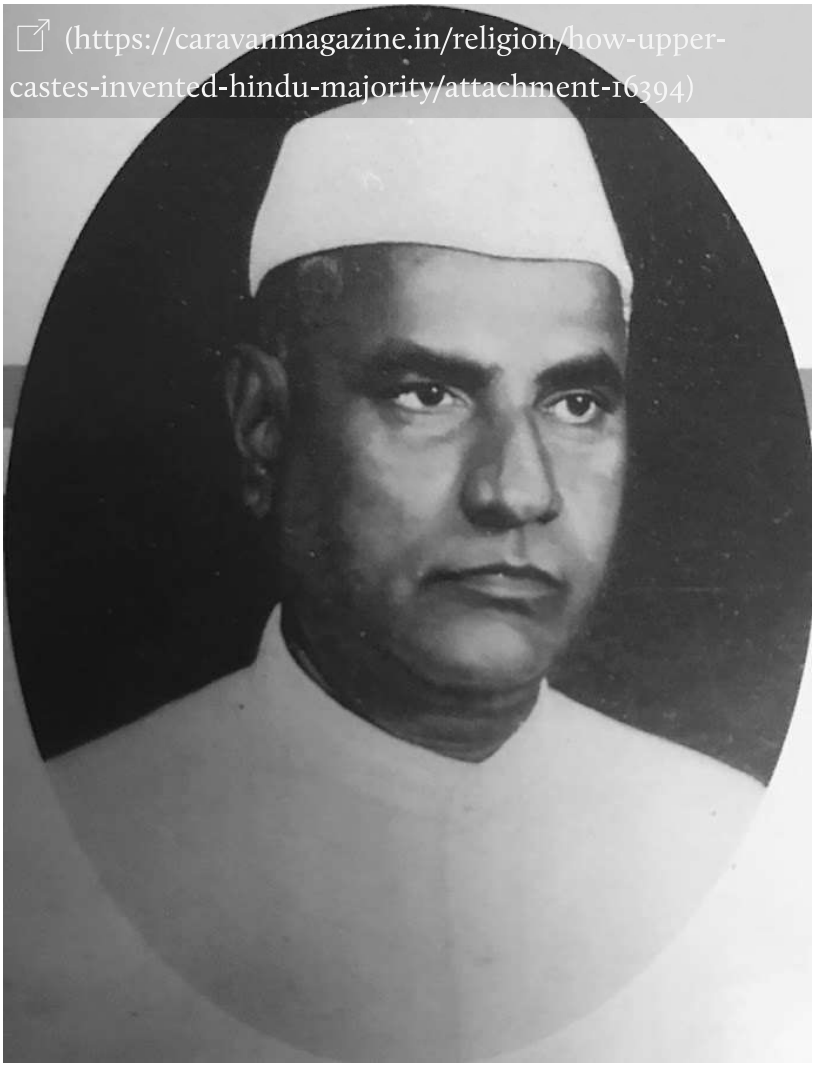
The administrative uses and mentions of “Hindu” to refer to a religion began only from the 1850s, notably in the Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850. Until then, it had been a floating descriptive term for colonial ethnographers. The people designated as “Hindu” neither used the word for themselves, nor did they consider themselves as adherents of one religion. The limited use of the term was without substantial consequences for the life of the natives. The upper-caste informants, whose beliefs had provided the British with the content for the term “Hindu,” now faced the idea that they shared the same religion as the lower castes whom they had enslaved, exploited and excluded. They now opposed the use of the term and began looking for alternative names, through which the upper castes could control their own representation, and distinguish themselves from the population they considered inferior.

The Caste Disabilities Removal Act, which protected the rights under law of the oppressed castes converting to Islam or Christianity, was a juridical shock to the upper castes. The law clearly indicates that the lower-caste people were using the modern juridical system to escape their millennia-old oppression through mass religious conversions. The law’s use of the term “Hindu” was protested by dominant castes. Vishnubuva Brahmachari, a well-known preacher, denounced the word “Hindu” as mlechcha.

Brahmachari, according to the scholar Veena Naregal, “drew huge crowds through his pugnacious, rhetorical style.” He wrote a work in 1864 titled *Vedokta Dharmaprakasha*, or dharma appropriate to the Vedas. He preferred the term “Vedokta-dharma” instead of “Hindu-

dharma." Many dominant-caste leaders at the time had been seeking to appropriate the Vedas to win favour with the European colonial powers.

Little else about India had acquired the rank of the Vedas in European minds. The fact that the Vedic corpus had survived in the subcontinent for around two millennia made it intriguing. More importantly, European scholars had been fascinated with "Aryans"—the people who had once moved in from outside the subcontinent, from the Eurasian Steppe, and who once spoke a language closer to their own tongues.



Influenced by Phule, Shahu, the Maharaj of Kolhapur, and Keshavrao Jedde (above) became one of the most prominent leaders of the non- Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The "Aryan" culture of the Rig Veda had come to an end long ago in the region of today's Pakistan. The Rig Veda and Yajur Veda contain a longing for the land of departure of its composers, and that land is not

the subcontinent. The Vedic ritual "Agnicayana," for instance, contains geometrical arrangements indicating a map that shows movement away from a homeland somewhere in the northwest, that is, the Eurasian Steppe region, towards the southeast. Upper castes began using the "authority" and "prestige" of texts that retained their nostalgia for another land far away from the subcontinent to gain political leverage.

To ingratiate themselves with the British, upper-caste leaders tried to make this new religion palatable to them. Brahmachari, in this sense, was a precursor to Aurobindo, Dayananda Saraswati and Vivekananda. Like other nineteenth-century upper-caste leaders, Brahmachari opposed sati, which the colonial administration had already criminalised, and advocated conditional widow remarriage. He emphasised vegetarianism, even though it conflicted with the beliefs of the imagined Vedic, or Aryan, ancestors, who ate meat. Brahmachari was a proponent of Vedic physics, Vedic chemistry and even Vedic time travel. Vivekananda claimed that the Aryans had discovered the idea of evolution before Charles Darwin. "There is then nothing fantastic in Dayananda's idea that the Veda contains truths of science as well as truths of religion," Aurobindo wrote. "I will even add my own conviction that the Veda contains other truths of a science which the modern world does not at all possess."

The emphasis on the Vedas was used by upper castes to strike an alliance with the British and get the colonial masters to share some of their power. In 1893, in an open letter to the parliament of the former British colony of Natal, Mohandas Gandhi described upper-caste Indians as "Aryan."

"I venture to point out that both the English and the Indians spring from a common stock, called the Indo-Aryan," Gandhi wrote. He insisted that, through this common racial origin, "Providence has put the English and the Indians together, and has placed in the hands of the former the destinies of the latter."

In the meantime, Dayananda Saraswati was constructing his own ancient religion called "Arya-dharma," which he wanted to be based on the Vedas alone, excising the reams of Brahminical scripture created since. The orthodox Brahmins of Benaras saw Dayananda as a threat and created their own movement calling for Sanatana Dharma, or the eternal order, as the new national religion for non-Christian and non-Muslim populations. Gandhi identified himself as a "Sanatani Hindu."

The term "Sanatana Dharma" is the choice of some Hindu nationalists who are aware that "Hindu" is a Persian, and thus a mlechcha, word, and are therefore happy to do away with it without affecting their programme. According to the Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass, "dharma is primarily and essentially the *varnasramadharma*, the order of castes and the stages of life," and "it is dharma which distinguishes the castes from one another and draws a line between 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan.'"

Only in their encounter with the West, and their competition with the missionaries, did the upper castes reinterpret dharma in moral and ethical terms in order to approximate Western standards so as to continue their social dominance. Thus, Halbfass says that "Sanatana dharma was a concept of self-assertion against Christianity."

THE OPPRESSED CASTES of the subcontinent, who were and are much greater in number than the upper castes, experienced the colonial encounter very differently. They found that colonialism provided them emancipatory conditions: religious conversion, legal recourse against discrimination, democratic electoral processes, access to modern education and new kinds of employment. For the first time, they could seek equal rights—freedoms as quotidian as the right to walk the same streets as everyone else, the right to drink water from the village well and the right to ask for compensation for their labour.

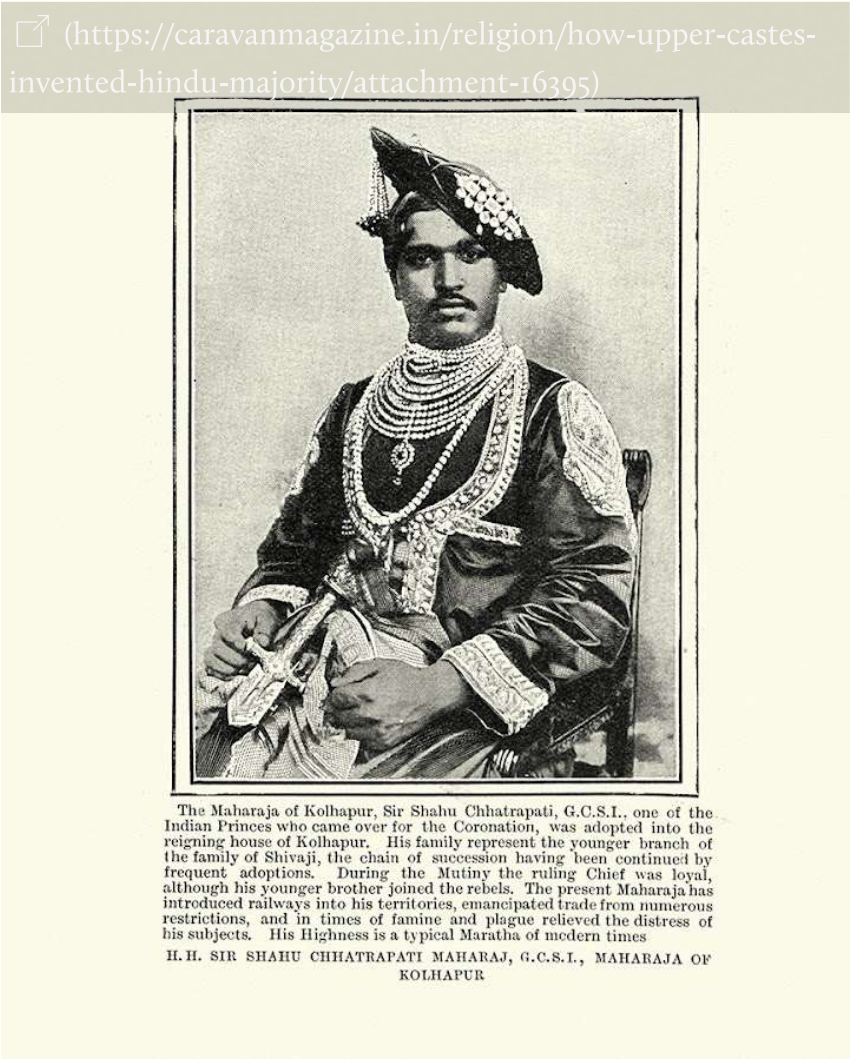
While the minority upper castes did not consider lower castes as their own, and treated them as untouchable, they wanted them to recognise caste hierarchy and perform the labour traditionally assigned to them. The attempts made by the lower-caste majority to seize the fortunes offered to them under colonialism are rarely attended to in the

historiographies of India. Under colonial law, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, oppressed castes were able to drive forward political-awareness programmes, educational movements and social reforms.

The British Indian Army opened employment outside of caste occupations to oppressed communities such as the Paraiyar (later anglicised as Pariah) in Madras, the Namashudras in Bengal and the Mahars in Maharashtra, providing social ascent for these communities. The father and the grandfather of BR Ambedkar, a Mahar, had both served in the British army.

As the Caste Disabilities Removal Act reveals, religious conversions were widespread across the subcontinent. Predictably, then as well as now, conversion was also seen by the upper castes as the most threatening strategy against their dominance. Several Indian states have laws to curb religious conversions even today.

Between the 1840s and 1850s, the upper castes of the erstwhile Madras Presidency formed two mercenary organisations to stem the tide of conversions—the Vibuthi Sangam, or the sacred-ash society, and the Sadu Veda Siddhanta Sabha, or the society for spreading the theology of the Vedas. The Madras Presidency witnessed assaults and pogroms against the lower castes who were converting to Christianity—to this day, upper-caste organisations continue to respond to religious conversions with violence. For instance, the region's Nadar community, which undertook mass conversions, witnessed a violent backlash. These events forced the British to enact the Caste Disabilities Removal Act.


(https://caravanmagazine.in/religion/how-upper-castes-invented-hindu-majority/attachment-16395)
The Maharaja of Kolhapur, Sir Shahu Chhatrapati, G.C.S.I., one of the Indian Princes who came over for the Coronation, was adopted into the reigning house of Kolhapur. His family represent the younger branch of the family of Shivaji, the chain of succession having been continued by frequent adoptions. During the Mutiny the ruling Chief was loyal, although his younger brother joined the rebels. The present Maharaja has introduced railways into his territories, emancipated trade from numerous restrictions, and in times of famine and plague relieved the distress of his subjects. His Highness is a typical Maratha of modern times
H.H. SIR SHAHU CHHATRAPATI MAHARAJ, G.C.S.I., MAHARAJA OF KOLHAPUR

Influenced by Phule, Shahu, the Maharaj of Kolhapur, and Keshavrao Jedde became one of the most prominent leaders of the non- Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. WALKER ART LIBRARY / ALAMY PHOTO

The colonial encounter also opened up the possibility of modern education. The only valid education available in the subcontinent until then had been centred on Brahminical scriptures and ritualistic instruments, which were prohibited to the lower castes. The ideas of the non-Brahminical sects were undermined. The values introduced by colonial education—based on science, the English language, modern jurisprudence and the notion of progress—began to displace the older value system of the upper castes, which was based on the Vedas, the Dharmashastras, Sanskrit and the caste order.

A momentous product of colonial and missionary education was Jotirao Phule, who was born in 1827 in Maharashtra in the oppressed Mali caste, traditionally occupied in gardening. Phule received English schooling from the Scottish Mission High School in Pune. He found the historic rupture introduced into the caste order by colonial rule to

be a revolutionary accident. “What fool would accept their advice to drive the English, who have rescued us from the slavery of the bhats”—Maharashtrian Brahmins—“away from our land,” Phule wrote. “Thank God that He helped the brave English to subdue the rebellion of the bhat.”

Phule’s progressive polemic turned the “Aryan” discourse against its proponents, Tilak most notable among them. Phule asserted that the upper-caste “Aryans” were oppressors rather than representatives and leaders of India. He interpreted the Aryan migration theory as Aryans being an outside force that had conquered the indigenous people of India. He talked of Aryans not as a racially superior, civilising force, but as barbaric oppressors. He saw Rama as a symbol of the Aryan conquest of India and attacked the ideas of the Vedas. Along with his wife, Savitribai, Phule became a proponent for the education of India’s oppressed communities, such as Dalits, Shudras and women. Through his intellectual and organisational work against caste and all forms of conservatism, he spearheaded the birth and growth of a genuine social revolution on the subcontinent.

Phule’s Satyashodhak Samaj was the earliest social-reform organisation after the upper-caste Prarthana Samaj, and contemporary with the Arya Samaj. It pre-dated the Indian National Congress and became a mass movement around the same time that the Congress did. In 1875, the Satyashodhaks founded the newspaper *Din Bandhu*.

Tilak, the most celebrated icon of Brahmin nationalism, became an opponent of Phule. In 1881, Tilak started his newspaper *Kesari*. While Jotiba and Savitribai Phule were early proponents of women’s education and equality, Tilak declared that denying public space to women was essential to “Hindutva.” When a case was registered against the husband of an 11-year-old girl because she “died due to injuries sustained during intercourse with her much-older husband,” the academic Dorothy M Figueira writes, Tilak defended the man and opposed raising the age of consent by accusing the girl of being deformed and one of “the dangerous freaks of nature.” The scholar Parimala Rao observes in a 2008 essay, “Tilak’s Criticism of Rakhmabai

and Ramabai," that, in this emerging idea of "Hinduism, which was for all practical purposes the Varnashramadharma, women occupied a subordinate position, and any attempt to change that was considered a threat." According to Rao, Tilak's idea of a Hindu woman as a subservient daughter-in-law was "diametrically opposed to the reformist construct of emancipated and educated women. Hence, the nationalist critique of the colonial rule was motivated by patriarchal and caste interests."

From the mid nineteenth century, Phule challenged every attempt to construct a societal form in an India organised according to caste and led by Brahmins. Since 1818, Brahmins had been the mainstay of the revivalist organisations that sought to maintain upper-castes power against the rising lower-caste challenge. Phule succeeded in undermining Brahmin-dominated revivalist organisations such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthna Samaj, and especially the Hindu Mahasabha, which were trying to find a foothold in western India. Phule would influence leaders such as Shahu of the Bhonsle dynasty, Keshavrao Jedde and Dinkarrao Javalkar, who would lead the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra.

The historian Rosalind O Hanlon wrote, in 1985, that "it was Phule who, almost singlehandedly, provided the re-interpretations of the past, the potent symbolism and the vivid imagery which was to form the ideological substance of this identity. … With its self-consciousness, its conviction of a unique role in Maharashtra's history and wider cultural traditions, and its ability to assimilate a very broad range of non-Brahmin social groups, this identity represented a startling new departure from older social and cultural forms, and was to be, in its own way, an instrument of radical social reform." In Kerala, Ayyankali and Sahodaran Ayyappan emerged as prominent leaders of the lower castes. Ayyappan denounced the nationalist movement as an upper-caste project, saying, "I am ashamed of being a nationalist because nationalism is deceptive and it is a strategy to maintain the upper-caste hegemony."

The non-Brahmin movement took the form of the Justice Party in the Madras Presidency. This was the precursor to the Dravidian movement. The Dravidian movement, too, saw the creation of the "Hindu" as an upper-caste "Aryan" assertion over diverse oppressed people of the Indian subcontinent. Under EV Ramasamy, commonly known as Periyar, the movement went against Brahminism and religion itself. It would shape the state's politics over the next century.

The startlingly distinct perspectives on the colonial encounter of lower-caste people and intellectuals have not received enough attention, and their histories have been made peripheral in the political understanding of the modern period.

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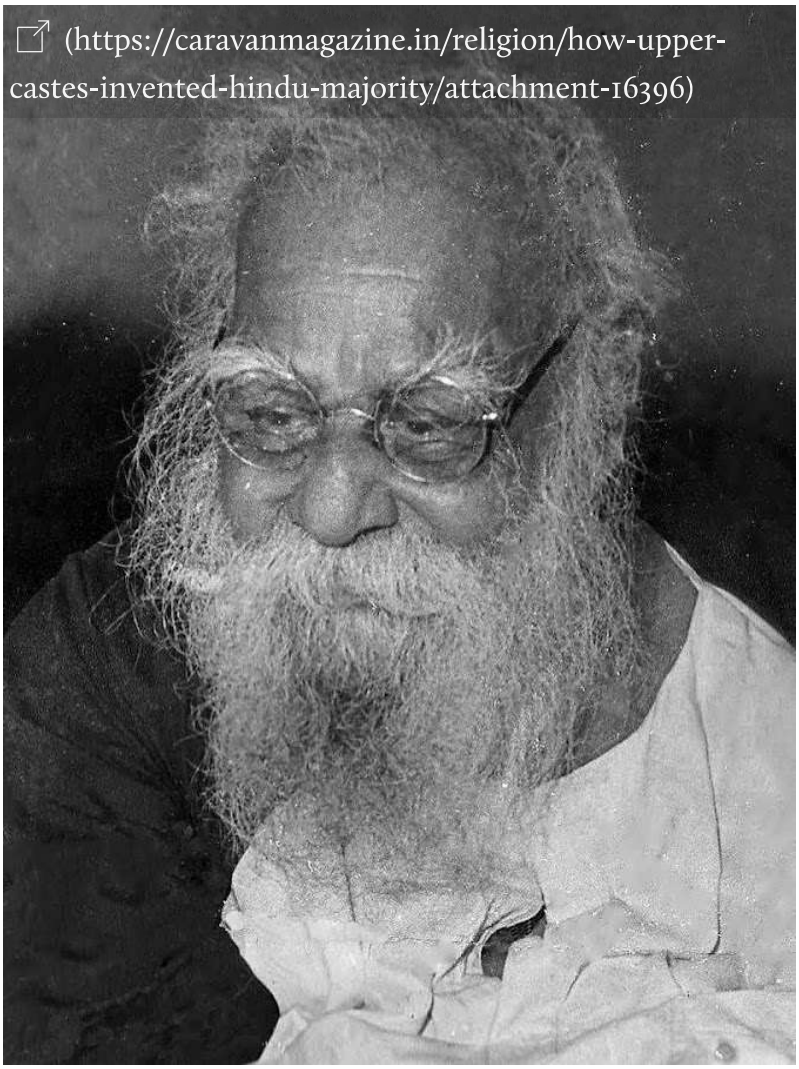


Under EV Ramasamy, commonly known as Periyar, the Dravidian movement went against Brahminism and religion itself. It would shape Tamil Nadu's politics over the next century. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY, caste oppression and the demographic distribution of castes became the central question in

politics. Upper castes experienced an unprecedented pushback as they were by then found to be a minority. At the time, for something to be identified as a religion, it needed to be recognised by the state as well as to appear as already encompassing the "spiritual life" of a large population. The real life of the "Hindu" religion, then, began with the census operations of the colonial administration, through which it entered the enumerative categories of the state.

From 1872, the term "Hindu," over which even British officers had not found agreement, was being used in census operations to classify peoples of the subcontinent. The surveyed population was offered five options to choose from under "religion"—Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Other. The census officers were aware of variations in religious practices on the subcontinent, and were baffled by the fact that most Indians, when asked to fill in their religion, named their caste or local community.

In order to identify who was a Hindu, the enumerators devised checklists of criteria, but the answers in all provinces disproved their initial assumption that a great diversity of beliefs, forms of worship and self-identification somehow formed a unified, homogenous religion. The so-called "Hindus" of the east preferred vegetables to meat, but elsewhere they were indiscriminate meat-eaters. Some prayed to one god and some others prayed to too many. Some had access to Brahmin priests, some had priests of their own castes and some had not needed priests at all. Some "Hindus" practiced burial and some others burned their dead. There were "Hindu" gods who were impure for some other "Hindus." The census enumerators worried that this would result in an extraordinary number of religious categories, which moreover duplicated the caste categories. The checklist's criteria were conceived from a Brahminical perspective. On narrowing and making specific the criteria for who was a Hindu, a massive number of people fell into the category of "Other," rather than "Hindu." The census began to reveal many different religions claimed by significant numbers of respondents—for example, the Mysore census revealed the presence of Shaivas, Madhavacharis, Lingayets,

Swami Narayens, Ramanujas, Wallabhacharyas, Brijmargis and Kabir Panthis, while the Coorg census showed that people declared themselves Srivaishnava, Vishnuvite, Jain, Buddhist, Coorgs, Brahmin, Smarta and Sivite rather than "Hindu."

So, while they were painfully conscious that they could not ascertain the substantive defining content of who was a real Hindu, the census officials continued to use the term. And yet, they considered the first census, of 1872, to be a failure in treating "Hindu" as a religious category both in terms of its distinguishing traits and in terms of its definite membership. They admitted, in the words of Henry Beverley in the 1872 Bengal Census Report, that "the term 'Hindu' is used in the simple sense of non-Mohamedan as any other." The name "Hindu" had been found convenient by the census officers because it was a good negative concept.

Negative concepts do not do much except specify that something is not of a certain kind. For instance, if we were to mark out "all that are not cows" with "N-Cow," this term, "N-Cow," could refer to books, galaxies, cow dung and The Beatles. As a negative concept, "Hindu" served the purpose of marking out peoples who were not Christians, Jews or Muslims. However, it was impossible to find a common trait for this group, which remains the case even today. We can see the peculiar power of the negative concept in the present-day push towards Hindu expansionism, which assumes that if any domain of life has not been well defined under law, it can be annexed.

The subsequent censuses did not change the situation. In a 2005 essay, the sociologist Michael Haan paraphrased a "tirade" by the 1881 census commissioner of Punjab, Denzil Ibbleston, on the meaninglessness of the word "Hindu."

> The Hindus of the plains worshipped the saints of their Muslim neighbours; the Hindus of the hills worshipped the devils and deities of the aborigines; and the godlings of the peasants were

> divided into classes of pure and impure. Most of the gods of the Hindu were strictly territorial, worshipped in one part of India.

Census officials pressed the category onto non-Muslims, non-Christians and non-Buddhists despite the knowledge that it did not represent one single religion but covered vastly diverse people through an elasticity not permitted to the other religious categories.

In the 1890s, many upper-caste Indians became aware of this new religion being used to designate them. The Arya Samaj ran a campaign in its newspaper against this mlechcha term and sought its removal from census operations. It correctly understood that "Hindu" was a pejorative tag given to those Indians who could not be identified with a definitive religious group.

The exigency that changed the Arya Samaj's mind about "Hindu" and mobilised upper-caste leaders of the Congress and other organisations behind it was statistical—the prospect of being exposed as a minority. Census statistics would not have mattered to the upper castes and their organisations such as the Congress had it not been for the electoral reforms and modern juridical practices that were being implemented by the British colonial administration.

The British began expanding the participation of elected Indian representatives in the government. Since the size of a population could affect its share in government, of resources such as education and other privileges, numbers became highly important. The structure of elected local governance that was being implemented across the colony meant that the majority lower castes, who were beginning to mobilise, were set to have at least an equal role in the rule of the subcontinent for the first time in millennia. The reversal of the balance of power could be prevented provided the lower-caste majority was distracted from these statistical revelations and retained within the administrative provisions of colonial law as a category similar to the upper castes, and subordinated to them.

In the wake of the 1901 census, some Muslim organisations demanded separate electorates for Muslims. In 1906, another Muslim deputation pressed for a "proportional share of government employment, representation on municipal boards, juridical posts, and seats on University Senates and Syndicates, in short throughout the entire system of government patronage." The Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909 awarded separate electorates to Muslims. "The granting of an electorate for Muslims in which they alone would vote brought the idea of communal electorates for minorities to the forefront in the minds of all communities which feared for their submersion in a government run by the dominant caste Hindu community," Eleanor Zelliot wrote in *Dr Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement*.

Ahead of the 1911 census, the census commissioner of the colonial government, Edward Albert Gait, decided to address the problem of who was to be counted as "Hindu." He issued a circular to the superintendents of various provinces.

The document was an attempt to devise "the criteria which might be taken to determine whether or not a man is a genuine Hindu." It asked the superintendents to enumerate castes that deny the supremacy of Brahmins, deny the authority of the Vedas, do not worship "Hindu gods," have no access to Brahmins as priests, are considered as polluting by the upper castes, are not allowed in temples, bury their dead, eat beef and do not revere the cow. The results, which were published in the 1911 census, revealed that although the dominant castes, especially the Brahmins, shared a more or less uniform set of codes and practices across wide geographical distances, they had little in common with a vast population that had been counted as "Hindu."

"In the Central Provinces and Berar a quarter of the persons classed as Hindus deny the supremacy of the Brahmins and the authority of the Vedas," the 1911 census notes. "A quarter do not worship the great Hindu Gods, and are not served by good Brahmin priests; a third are denied access to temples; a quarter cause pollution by touch; a seventh always bury their dead, while a half do not regard cremation as obligatory; and two-fifths eat beef."

The findings united various dominant-caste leaders and groups in protest—from the Congress to the Arya Samaj to the Sanatana Dharma Sabha.

A great deal of commentary from the time notes the effect the 1911 census had on the dominant castes. "A question that is agitating Hinduism at the present moment is as to whether these [untouchable] classes should be counted as Hindus or not," Thomas Holderness, a British civil servant, wrote in his 1912 book *Peoples and Problems of India*. "Ten years ago, the answer would have been emphatically negative. Even now the conservative feeling of the country is for their exclusion."

In a 1955 interview, BR Ambedkar accused Mohandas Gandhi of writing in opposition to the caste system in English-language papers while writing in support of it in the Gujarati papers he published. HISTORIC COLLECTION / ALAMY PHOTO

The Arya Samaj leader Lala Lajpat Rai, in 1915, also wrote about the effect of the circular. Lajpat Rai was candid that the real "Hindus" are

the upper castes and the "non-Hindus" are the people the upper caste would neither acknowledge as their own, nor even touch: "One fine morning the learned pundits of Kashi rose to learn that their orthodoxy stood the chance of losing the allegiance of six crores of human beings who, the Government and its advisors were told, were not Hindus, in so far as other Hindus would not acknowledge them as such, and would not even touch them."

Lajpat Rai's concern with "losing the allegiance" of a large population of lower castes gives away the game that "Hindu" was to be adopted so as to mask both the gulf that the upper castes maintained between themselves and the lower castes, and the conditional, calibrated "allegiance" they desired from them. Allegiance, after all, is claimed by lieges.

The ferocity of the protests by the dominant castes led to the withdrawal of the Gait circular. Lajpat Rai saw the withdrawal of the circular as the "danger having been removed of Hinduism being bereft of the depressed classes by the fiat of the Census Department." The responses to the circular, such as an article published in the magazine *Modern Review*, are telling of the meaning of the new "Hindu" religion. The author of the article asserted that only "Hindus" shall define the criteria for this new religion, which were clearly those of the upper castes, especially Brahmins. Claiming that the "Brahmins and other high caste Hindus have never denied the 'untouchable' castes the title of Hindu," he explained these criteria from the Brahminical point of view as follows:

> For non-Hindus must never forget that it is an essential characteristic of the existing Hindu social organism that some members are considered higher and some lower, some clean, some unclean. … The orthodox Pauranik Hindu thinks that all who are not twice-born or *dvijas* sprang from the feet of Brahma. Now in the human body, the feet are very useful but not essential to life, a man lives after his feet or legs have been amputated. But none but an idiot would say that the feet or legs

> are not a part of the human body. Such in the estimation of the Hindus are the *non-dvijas*...

That is, the upper castes form the essential organs of the "Hindu" social body, and, as the owners of the religion, they also own the lower castes upon whom they have a right to "confer" the new religion, even if it might not be in the interest of the lower castes to receive it.

Following the Gait circular, the Arya Samaj sought aggressively to convert the lower castes, Dalits as well as Muslims and Christians, into their revived Vedic religion through a movement called *shuddhi*, meaning ritualistic purification. This reiterates both the status of the lower castes as excluded from the upper-caste religion, and also the necessity to "purify" them before including them as unequal co-religionists.

The uncertainties that had plagued the British administration for two decades were set aside without having ever been adequately addressed, and with the suppression of the Gait circular by the upper castes the term "Hindu" was established effectively and finally as a descriptor for the majority population. As the 1921 census commissioner JT Marten acknowledged with regret, "Hindu is an unsatisfactory category in the classification of religion, but one that would remain. In the first place Hinduism is not only or essentially a religion. The term also implies country, race and a social organisation." These latter qualities of the vague and empty negative concept of "Hindu" were best suited for its political use to represent a nominal unity whereas in reality there was not only caste-based segregation but increasingly deep caste contestation. It was like claiming that American slavery was the religion of the Blacks because it kept them socially tied to the Whites in all aspects of daily life.

The preparations for the census exercise meant that people were being made to respond as "Hindu" through various means. During the 1931 census, "The propaganda campaign by Hindu Sabha produced many fold effects—some Kacharis willingly returned as Hindus, others were

convinced by the enumerators to accept that category, and in some cases the enumerators took advantage of confusion or ignorance to record them as Hindus," according to the scholar Kenneth Jones. By the 1941 census, the anxiety about the numbers of the "Hindu" had only increased. The official journal of the Hindu Mahasabha advised readers that "to preserve solidarity and integrity of Hinduism, as a whole, with a view to safeguard our political interests, it will be in the mutual interest of us all, to get ourselves registered as Hindus so far as the community column of the census is concerned."

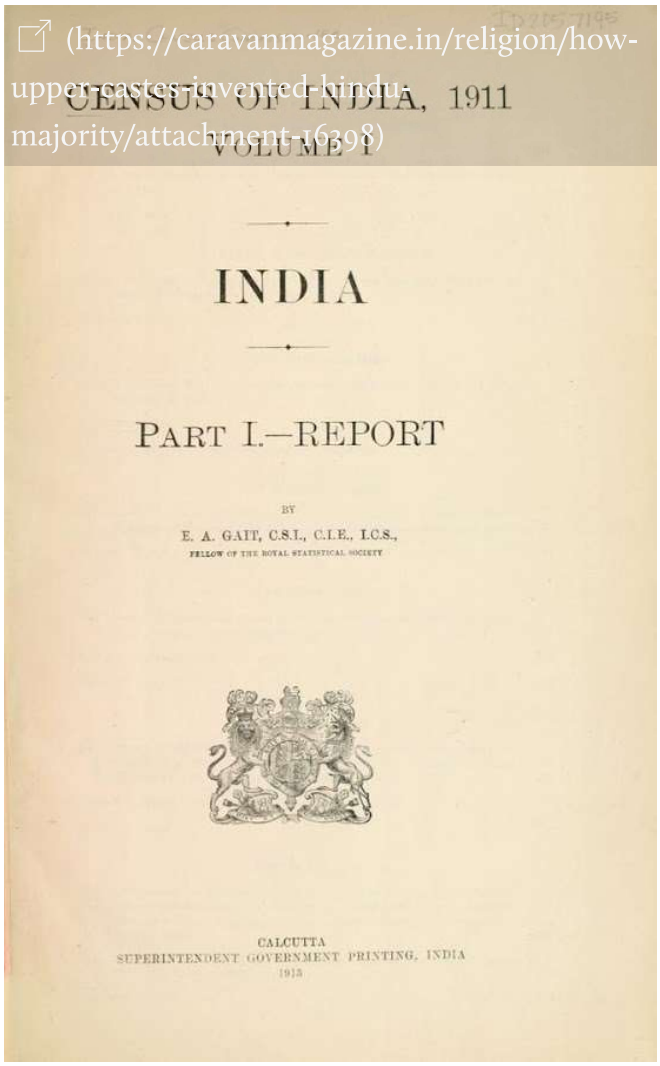
Octavio Paz had remarked, "Like an enormous metaphysical boa, Hinduism slowly and relentlessly digests foreign cultures, gods, languages, and beliefs." The deliberate manoeuvres of the upper castes around the census show that "Hinduism" was also a political boa that could convert people into Hindus by "administrative fiat" and, thus, continue to pretend that it was not a religion of conversion.

THE UPPER CASTES pursued the transfer of power to themselves under the leadership of the coalition of interests that was the Congress. They anticipated that the social hierarchy of the caste order would not survive in a constitutional democracy based on the principles of political, material and social equality. Hence, the reform measures of the colonial administration were met with extreme reproach by the upper castes. Under the Congress coalition, upper-caste leaders launched agitations against colonial reforms. But they were also confronted with the growing agitations of the lower-caste people.

According to John Zavos, a religious-studies scholar, "Representation, then, emerges as a central bone of contention between the non-Brahmin and Brahmin dominated organizations in western India. … low caste mobilization within this framework implicitly challenged the legitimacy of ideological developments towards the organization of Hinduism."

The anti-caste movement had been steadily gathering strength in western India in the nineteenth century, with numerous lower-caste

organisations under the intellectual leadership of Phule and with the support of Shahu, the maharaja of Kolhapur. The burgeoning movement established a strong anti-caste discourse and, therefore, drew aggressive reactions from Brahmin organisations that were seeking to gain social and political influence. The confrontations were particularly acute with Tilak, one of the first figures to use the word "Hindutva," and his followers.



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A great deal of commentary from the time notes the effect the 1911 census had on the dominant castes. The Arya Samaj leader Lala Lajpat Rai remarked on the importance of the census as the "danger having been removed of Hinduism being bereft of the depressed classes by the fiat of the Census Department."

Through the 1920s, the non-Brahmin movement also began to find electoral success. Countless gatherings, events and publications led to a massive mobilisation of the lower castes. They ran major educational and social-relief institutions, and superseded the Ganapati festival, publicised by Tilak, with their own Chhatrapati festival. They clashed with Brahmin organisations in the Pune municipality, the courts as

well as the streets, challenging them successfully. According to the sociologist Gail Omvedt, there are records of riots between "non-Brahmins" and "nationalists" as a result of these confrontations.

Ambedkar found in Phule one of his major sources of inspiration, describing him as "the Greatest Shudra of Modern India, who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that, for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule." In 1920, with the help of Shahu, at the age of 29, he started a weekly known as *Mooknayak*. While he became involved with the movement intermittently, he continued to work as a legal professional in the 1920s. In 1926, he defended in court three non-Brahmin leaders who had been sued for libel by Tilakite Brahmins at *Kesari*, including Tilak's son, and were jailed by the British government.

The aggressive reaction of upper-caste groups to this upsurge of lower-caste movements was driven by the fear of caste-mixing and loss of their traditional dominance over society. Zavos writes that "low caste mobilization became increasingly the most threatening 'other' for the ideology of Hindu organization." The Hindutva movement was a way to adapt to this threat through political manoeuvres and a show of reforms. As the social theorist Aijaz Ahmad writes, "when anti-Brahminical movements surfaced in Maharashtra, whether under Phule or Ambedkar, it was the extremity of the backlash of upper castes in that region that gave us the RSS in the first place." It was in a period of increasing threat to their social supremacy that the upper castes began projecting Muslims as the enemy in order to consolidate the Hindu identity, which made the Partition of the country inevitable.

In the 1930s, the popularity of Mohandas Gandhi and the anti-colonial movement led to a parting of ways within the non-Brahmin movement, with some factions merging with the Congress. Without this merger, the Congress would not have found traction for mass politics in the Bombay Presidency.

Gandhi proved particularly deft in dealing with lower-caste agitations. By acting as a mediator between the lower castes and the priestly class, he often managed to deradicalise anti-caste movements. His international fame helped conceal his supremacist views on race and caste, and his clear support for the oppressive caste hierarchy. Ambedkar would emerge as Gandhi's only challenger during the period.

In 1924, in Kerala, the oppressed castes began their agitation for the right to walk on all public roads, including those in front of temples. Priests, who considered the lower-caste presence "polluting," had forbidden the Ezhavas, Dalits and other lower castes from using the roads surrounding a Shiva temple in the town of Vaikom. At the time, the anti-Brahmin movement was going strong in the south of the subcontinent. While Vaikom was part of the kingdom of Travancore, the neighbouring Madras Presidency was in the hands of the Justice Party. To maintain its legitimacy, the Congress had no option but to take part in the movement.

Gandhi appointed himself the leader of the movement and began holding talks with the local upper castes. He also insisted that "non-Hindus" should not be part of the movement, asking leaders such as George Joseph to withdraw from it, breaking its multi-religious alliance.

In 1927, Ambedkar led an agitation, marching with thousands of Dalits to drink water from a public tank in Mahad, Maharashtra. A riot broke out soon after the event, when furious mobs of upper castes indulged in violence. Brahmins used mantras, cow dung and cow urine to "purify" the tank. Meanwhile, that same year, Gandhi wrote in his journal *Young India* that the "discovery of the law of Varnashrama is a magnificent result of the ceaseless search for truth." When Ambedkar decided to revisit the site later that year, the upper castes filed a case against him in court. Years later, the Bombay High Court ruled in favour of the lower castes, declaring that it was illegal to disallow anyone from drinking water from a public tank.

The pinnacle of the confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar was the period between 1930 and 1932, when three roundtable conferences for constitutional reforms in India were held by the British government. Ambedkar demanded in the first conference that separate electorates should be provided for the lower castes. The Congress predictably walked out of the conference in protest. Separate electorates for the lower castes would have had major implications for the history of the subcontinent. They would have meant the lower castes had separate elections and they alone would choose their leaders.

But Gandhi stubbornly opposed the demand. In a 1932 letter to the British prime minister, Ramsay Macdonald, he wrote, "I sense the injection of a poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism." By "Hinduism" Gandhi certainly meant the reign of the upper castes over the lower castes, which is essentially sanatana dharma, and which, in practice, meant the eternal partition of the people of the subcontinent.

In a statement to the press in the same year, Gandhi admitted that he did not know the religious criteria by which the untouchables were to remain in Hinduism. "There is a subtle something—quite indefinable—in Hinduism which keeps them in it even in spite of themselves." However, in a conversation with Vallabhbhai Patel, in August 1932, Gandhi expressed some of his real anxieties about separate electorates. The demand would "lead to bloodshed," Gandhi said. "Untouchable hooligans will make common cause with Muslim hooligans and kill *caste Hindus.*"

After the British awarded separate electorates to Dalits, Gandhi threatened to kill himself, going on a fast unto death. Fearing the backlash from such an event, Ambedkar was forced to relent. As a result, the Poona Pact was signed between Ambedkar, who represented lower castes; Madan Mohan Malviya, who represented upper castes; and Gandhi. Instead of separate electorates, the Poona Pact provided reserved constituencies for Scheduled Caste candidates in a joint electorate. This paved the way for a recurring phenomenon in Indian electoral politics, where major political parties can gain these seats by

fielding their stooges and winning through control of the upper-caste vote.

Gandhi's duplicity on caste was strategic. In a 1955 interview, Ambedkar accused Gandhi of writing in opposition to the caste system in English-language papers while writing in support of it in the Gujarati papers he published. In 1936, after the Poona Pact negotiations where Gandhi had theatrically declared his commitment to alleviating the suffering of lower-caste people, he wrote an essay titled "The Ideal Bhangi." In it, he demanded that the people condemned to inherit manual scavenging as their caste occupation should embrace it as their highest duty:

> My ideal Bhangi would know the quality of night-soil and urine. He would keep a close watch on these and give a timely warning to the individual concerned. Thus he will give a timely notice of the results of his examination of the excreta. That presupposes a scientific knowledge of the requirements of his profession. He would likewise be an authority on the subject of disposal of night-soil in small villages as well as big cities and his advice and guidance in the matter would be sought for and freely given to society. It goes without saying that he would have the usual learning necessary for reaching the standard here laid down for his profession. Such an ideal Bhangi, while deriving his livelihood from his occupation, would approach it only as a sacred duty. In other words, he would not dream of amassing wealth out of it.

Gandhi also exhorted the upper castes to use the latest pedagogy to instruct the people of the "Bhangi" caste on how to excel in cleaning upper-caste excreta and thus become scientists of shit. In Gandhi's vision, the only perfection permitted to the "Bhangi" was within their caste occupation.

By the 1940s, the newly invented Hindu religion of the upper castes had succeeded in encompassing, through governmental procedures,

the lower-caste peoples under it. The majority of lower-caste people were not aware of their new religious status and its implications. The only division the upper castes wanted to highlight was that between Hindus and Muslims. Muslims argued that their rights would never be safe in a Hindu-dominated India. Pakistan was in the making.

{THREE}

THE INDEPENDENCE OF INDIA, from the perspective of the lower castes, was simply a transfer of power from the colonialists to the upper-caste elites, in which the deployment of the "Hindu" category played a most significant role.

The upper-caste character of the Congress was impossible to hide, as it is even today. When S Nagappa, a scheduled-caste member of the Constituent Assembly, proposed that electoral candidates in reserved constituencies winning more than 35 percent of the scheduled-caste vote could be declared elected, Sardar Patel chided him, along with the entire Dalit community.

> Let us forget what Dr. Ambedkar or his group have done. Let us forget what you did. You have very nearly escaped partition of this country again on your lines. You have seen the result of separate electorates in Bombay, that when the greatest benefactor of your community [Gandhi] came to Bombay to stay in Bhangi quarters it was your people who tried to stone his quarters. What was it? It was again the result of this poison, and therefore I resist this only because I feel that the vast majority of the Hindu population wish you well. Without them where will you be?

The Congress eventually made minimal concessions to the lower castes in the form of reservations in government jobs and education, but the upper castes' dominance in every field continued unchecked.

Even the pittance granted in the form of reservations was a bone of contention for self-avowed Hindus. Most announcements of reservations over the years have been followed by tensions and sometimes months of violence perpetrated by the upper castes against lower castes. In Bihar, 1978 and 1980 saw violence against the lower castes when the Mungerilal commission's recommendations for reservations in government jobs were implemented. The historian Ornit Shani notes, "Large-scale atrocities, particularly against Dalits, continued throughout the 102 days of the riots." However, given that the leaders understood the dangers of taking on the oppressed majority, violence has been often redirected towards "non-Hindu" religious groups—mostly Muslims, but also Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists.

"Often Hindu-Muslim riots were caused not by friction between the two religions, but by an expansion of boundaries around a single religious community which was prompted by internal competition," Sandria B Freitag wrote in a 1980 essay.

In the inception of many of the "Hindu-Muslim" riots in independent India, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the deflection of caste conflicts is visible. These conflicts erupted as upper-caste agitations against the allocation of reservations for the lower castes. "Whenever there was an increase in communal riots the incidents of crime due to anti-reservation agitation would come down," the VS Dave commission on the 1985 Gujarat riots noted.

When the policy of reservation was extended for another ten years in 1969, anti-reservation agitations erupted in many parts of India, Shani noted in her book *Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat*. "Progressive state interventions for the benefit of lower- and backward-caste Hindus in educational institutions and government jobs were another particularly fraught policy area that produced growing uncertainties within the Hindu moral order," she wrote. "It was these caste conflicts that preceded the rise of communalism in Ahmedabad and elsewhere in India." Later that year

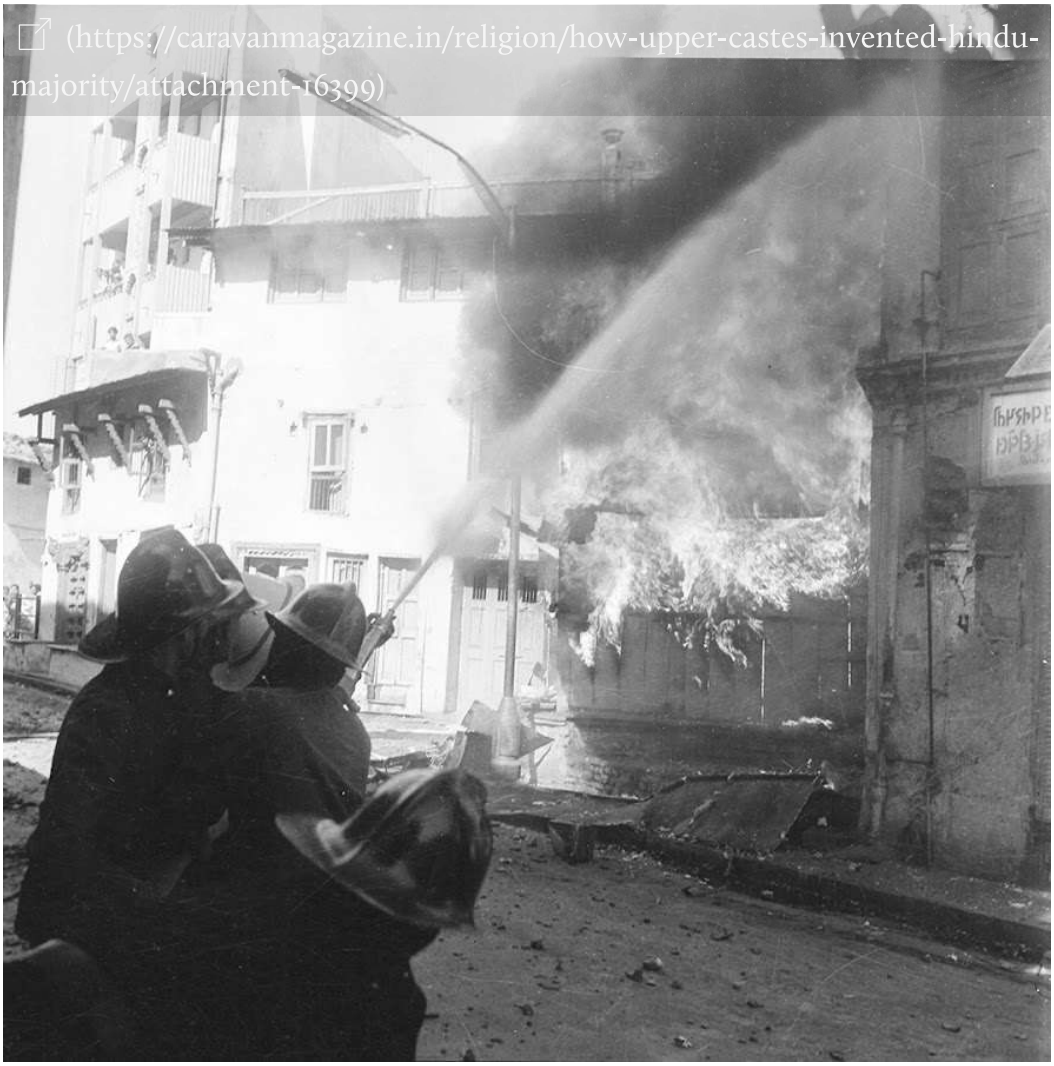
in Gujarat, Hindu nationalists orchestrated the deadliest riots since Partition.

Reservation for lower castes became a major source of conflict from the end of the 1970s in Gujarat as well as elsewhere in India. In 1980, when the Gujarat government decided to grant a quota for backward castes in post-graduate courses in medical colleges, upper castes mobilised aggressively against the backward castes. They took to the streets and enacted mock weddings of the "reservationist bride" and the "government groom." They also conducted a mock operation upon a clay model of a Dalit student "in order to show that his cranium contained nothing but saw-dust."

In 1985, the Congress won the Gujarat assembly election on the basis of what was called an alliance of KHAM—Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims. When that government increased the quota for the lower castes in government jobs and educational institutions from ten percent to 18 percent, the upper castes again took to the streets. These agitations were led by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the RSS.

As the Dave commission notes, "the anti-reservation movement took a sudden communal turn." The mobs began attacking Muslims. The commission found members of the ABVP, BJP and Vishwa Hindu Parishad complicit in the violence.

Analyses of several communal riots reveal how the false "Hindu majority" defines itself in society by victimising the religious minorities. Communal riots are often orchestrated to divert political and media attention from relentless challenges from lower-caste people against upper-caste supremacy. Secularism, interpreted in India as "Hindu-Muslim amity," often inadvertently legitimises the false "Hindu" majority. Therefore, real secularism in the Indian context will be the annihilation of caste.



The 1969 communal riots had been preceded by anti-reservation agitations after the policy of reservation was extended for another ten years earlier that year. SHUKDEV BHACHECH

INDIAN INTELLECTUALS, both in the country and in the diaspora, have unfortunately done little to challenge misconceptions around Hinduism. By taking the religion as it was presented by dominant-caste leaders, they have helped in its legitimisation. Predominantly upper-caste, these intellectuals have acquired positions of power in academic institutions in India, the United States and Europe. Fields such as postcolonial studies and subaltern studies have kept the focus on the white colonisers, who are blamed for any and all problems of the subcontinent. At the same time, the upper-caste academics cast themselves as subaltern voices.

British colonial rule was epochally different from any previous experience in the subcontinent's politics in that the pride of dharma, or their unchallenged caste supremacy, was confiscated from the upper castes, and they experienced this as a great humiliation. As the upper

castes went about constructing a religion that was acceptable to the British rulers, they also undertook a project of recovery of their lost pride, especially in the eyes of the white elites. Much of the academic output from fields such as postcolonial studies is part of that same project.

The earliest figure to take up that endeavour was Narendranath Dutta, popularly known as Vivekananda, whom the so-called Left and the Hindu Right equally venerate. Vivekananda interpreted Brahminical texts keeping a Western audience in mind and provided selective, distorted readings of them. His performances on his trips to the West in the 1890s gained him popularity, and he came to be known as a "great proponent of Hinduism." Although Gandhi's statues are either being brought down or seeing their presence challenged in several parts of the world in light of revelations of his racist and casteist views, scant attention has been paid to Vivekananda's racism, which corresponded to his casteism. As with Gandhi's doublespeak between his writings in Gujarati and English, Vivekananda, too, practised doublespeak, and spoke in racist terms about India "when not constrained by nationalist rhetoric" during his foreign travels, according to Dorothy M Figueira.

For Vivekananda, civilisation was racially bound to the "Aryan" race and its transmission to non-Aryan races was impossible without "Aryan blood." "The Aryan gives his blood to a race, and then it becomes civilised. Teaching alone will not do," he said in a lecture delivered in the United States in 1900. He saw in the Indian subcontinent a primary racial difference between Aryans and non-Aryans. "The people of Northern India belong to the great Aryan race, to which all of the people of Europe, except the Basques in the Pyrennees, and the Finns, are supposed to belong," he said. "The Southern India people belong to the same race as the ancient Egyptians and the Semites."

As with the racist idea of miscegenation, Vivekananda saw caste mixing as a danger to upper castes who are "Aryans." "There is something in caste, so far as it means blood; such a thing as heredity

there is, certainly," he said. "Now try to [understand]—why do you not mix your blood with the Negroes, the American Indians? Nature will not allow you. Nature does not allow you to mix your blood with them. There is the unconscious working that saves the race. That was the Aryan's caste." His writings are as repugnant as those of any other racist from the period, with the difference that his casteism was informing his racism.

Gandhi was also an admirer of Vivekananda. Both Gandhi and Vivekananda have been subjects of great adulation in postcolonial theory, since its beginnings in the 1980s. The discipline originated when the scholar Edward Said, and those who followed him, began using the theoretical tools of self-criticism of the West—in the works Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—in order to criticise colonial rule.

Through the deployment of these tools, not against the self but only against the Western Other, Indian postcolonial critics began asserting native pride and values, which were confused and hidden by colonial rule. The title of Ashis Nandy's work *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* reveals aptly the meaning of this project, whose goal was to recover the lost pride of the upper castes. When Rup Kanwar was killed in the sati practice in 1987, Indian feminists held protests. Nandy wrote an essay reprimanding and mocking them, saying that they were unable to understand the value systems of India and were enthralled by the West.

Leading proponents of postcolonial theory such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak installed a discourse about the history of the subcontinent in which the only dramatis personae were the "masters"—the white colonisers—and the "natives," whom the upper castes alone represent. The Native was used as a category for an undifferentiated brown mass of resistance, slyness and "aporias." Caste divisions and oppressions vanished into the category of the native with its moral superiority within the postcolonialist dyad. In the writings of postcolonial theorists, the upper castes' lamentations about colonial humiliation alone appear before the international audience,

obliterating the discursive space for lower-caste people's historical interventions and political desires. The dominance of these two disciplines in academia is congruent with the rise of Hindu-nationalist politics in India.

The upper-caste tendency to "recover" anticipated discoveries and inventions of modern science in ancient texts remains alive in the work of many academics, most notably Dipesh Chakrabarty. Chakrabarty has claimed that nature is "coeval" with supernatural powers. He dismisses all monotheisms to claim a peculiar superiority for "polytheism," easily recognisable as Hinduism. "I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with being human," he writes in his book *Provincialising Europe*. Chakrabarty states that different cultures and places determine their own forms of thought, and such forms cannot be tested against other standards. An obvious implication of this position is that Newton's Laws of Motion would hold only in the United Kingdom and particles will conform to "the standard model" only in the United States of America. He also argues that India was already a republic before colonial rule, referring to upper-caste rule through panchayats. Nandy, in a 1979 essay, went so far as to consider traditional cultural practices as an alternative to modern technology.

The self-assertion of the upper castes and the justification for their continuing social dominance in these texts often takes place through semantic contortions and theoreticised language. The political scientist Rajeev Bhargava uses the term "vertical diversity" to refer to the caste order, masking its exploitative character by giving it the positive connotation of diversity. He goes on to contrast this vertical diversity with "horizontal diversity," by which he refers to many religions existing in the subcontinent. The implicit injunction in such verbal acrobatics is to celebrate and foster diversity of both kinds—an upper-caste dream since the nineteenth century—rather than challenge the oppression wrought by this "vertical diversity."

These theories have created a confused public discourse, which has always been a helpful condition for the Hindu Right. They are aided also by what the sociologist Satish Deshpande calls "the emergence

here of a voice and a sensibility that is beginning to believe in its own castelessness."

Upper-caste academics have installed themselves as gatekeepers and prevent Dalit voices from being heard. The most notable example of this was in 2001, when several leading social scientists of India, such as Andre Beteille, DL Sheth and Dipankar Gupta, all from the upper castes and classes, opposed Dalit organisations and the activists Paul Divakar and Martin Macwan's address on caste oppression at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban. The anxiety of the upper castes to control and censor critical attention to caste is more than a century old, and it serves upper-caste interests to invisibilise victims of caste and portray them as a part of one family—whether it is "Hindu," "native," "indigenous" or "subaltern."

The dominance of these disciplinary paradigms in academic institutions thwarts the possibility of research into the experiences and historical perspectives of the lower castes. These disciplines have instituted an epistemological embargo on the emancipatory tools of the lower castes. In recent years, academics influenced by postcolonial theory have argued for education in vernacular languages, despite the fact that they themselves are proficient in English and have received the best of Western education, and their own children often study in universities abroad. Education in vernacular languages is, thus, seemingly being suggested as a confinement strategy for the lower castes and their intellectual contributions.

And so, the lower-caste majority has been forced to watch politics and history as it watches Bollywood movies, as tales of the triumphs of the upper castes of northwestern India. The lower castes have had to watch upper-caste heroes beat up lower-caste thugs on screens; to admire upper-caste heroines who observe caste obligations; and to cry when upper-caste mothers are humiliated by villains with Christian names such as Robert. The lower castes have had little representation in the long history of Indian cinema, which is analogous to their experience in all other domains, including academia.

For the longest time, the practice of untouchability extended to any discussion on caste. Eventually, academic institutions started floating the absurd idea that caste was a British invention, which absolved the upper castes of any responsibility in the matter. It is no coincidence that one would find most subscribers of that idea among either post-colonial circles or Hindu nationalists.

The Congress opposed the Mandal commission report and condemned it in parliament. A significant difference between the political parties and the RSS in this regard was that the latter perceived and spoke openly of the threat of "caste war" and an oppressed-caste revolution. BCCL

THE BATTLE between the Phuleite and Tilakite political projects has, thus, manifested itself in many forms since the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, it took the form of Gandhi versus Ambedkar. While the Phuleite project is a struggle for equal rights under modern democratic conventions through the annihilation of caste, the other project's aim is to retain caste hierarchies of the pre-modern era through manipulative ideologies. When historians, intellectuals and journalists deploy the term "Hindu" and "Hindu majoritarianism" unquestioningly, they are aligning with the Tilakite project, and opposing the Phuleite project. There is no innocent use of "Hindu."

Just as the threat of a delineation of castes through the Gait circular created an upper-caste backlash that had to be redirected towards Muslims, leading to the birth of the RSS, the response to the Mandal commission also led to caste tensions that were soon turned to fuel venomous, Islamophobic Hindu-nationalist organisations.

Rajiv Gandhi inaugurated his 1989 election campaign in Ayodhya with "the promise to usher in a *Rama Rajya*"—rule according to Rama—which Mohandas Gandhi also avowed as his political goal. He "totally and vehemently" opposed the Mandal commission report and condemned it in parliament. The significant difference between the political parties and the RSS in this regard was that the latter perceived and spoke openly of the threat of "caste war" and an oppressed-caste revolution. "There is today an urgent need to build up moral and spiritual forces to counter any fall-out from an expected Shudra revolution," the journalist MV Kamath wrote in the RSS's weekly publication *Organiser*.

The aim of the motorised-chariot procession towards the Babri mosque in 1990 was clear. The newspaper *Aaj* wrote that year, "Due to the aura of Ram, the demon of Reservation ran away." The casteist interpretation of the story of Rama is clearly alluded to here; the upper-caste Aryan king Rama defeats lower-caste "demons" time and again.

Another contemporary observation made in the middle of these developments, published on 10 October 1990 in the now-defunct journal *Social Scientist*, also pointed to the link between the Mandal agitations and the Rama temple movement. The journalist Sukumar Muralidharan wrote:

> The Mandal Commission is reflective of the effort of an assertive and productive section of the nation to capture the power that is their due. 'Mandir' seeks to maintain the customary order of precedence in social hierarchy through a ritual consolidation

along religious lines, and the subordination, in perpetuity, of the minority community.

These tools of distraction can only work for so long when one looks at the contemporary reality of caste oppression. Since 1931, the Indian state has refused to make public the caste composition of the population out of fear that the numbers of the upper castes will be exposed to be so low as to be "dangerous." In the late 1990s, a sample survey revealed that the non-Dalit lower castes alone constituted 52 percent of the total population, a fact that led to a reservation policy which the upper castes oppose strenuously. Previously, Dalits and Adivasis were taken to be 22 percent of the population. Government policy over the last two decades has been informed by these numbers.

But, in 2011, due to pressure from lower-caste political leaders, a caste census was conducted, which revealed the Dalit and Adivasi population to be at around 30 percent. The present government has refused to publish the entire report of this census, presumably for fear that the actual numbers of the lower castes could be much bigger than imagined. As the journalist Rajesh Ramachandran wrote in the *Economic Times*, based on the available government data, "If the OBC numbers are about 60 percent of the total population and the SC/ST, the only known figures, are 30 per cent, the upper castes can only be 10 per cent of the population."

Meanwhile, untouchability and atrocities against Dalits persist across India—65 percent of all crimes are committed against Dalits. About 71 percent of Dalit farmers are landless. Less than nine percent of those employed in the national media belong to the lower castes. Dalits and Adivasis together account for less than nine percent of the faculty in the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management. There are hardly any lower castes in the central government, and hardly any Dalits in provincial governments. The upper-caste minority is still ruling over the lower-caste majority using the courts, the police and other state machinery as instruments.

The "Hindu state" celebrated by the media on 5 August has not been established because the political project of Phule has not been vanquished yet.

The battles between the two projects have been continuous since the nineteenth century. In 1925, Kesavarao Jedde, a member of the Pune Municipal Corporation, proposed to erect a statue of Phule. For the Brahmin members of the municipality, the very notion that the form of the lower-caste Phule might take a position in "their city," even in the form of inert stone, was an untouchable thought. Jedde's proposal was defeated by the upper-caste members through protests and exertion of influence. Following that confrontation, Dinkarrao Javalkar published the book "*Deshache Dushman*," or "The Enemies of the Nation," arguing against Tilak and his followers. The title reveals the differing perspectives of the lower castes and the upper castes on the category of "Desh" or "Nation." If the Phuleite Javalkar had called upper-caste leaders enemies of the nation in the 1920s for opposing the annihilation of caste, all those who are standing for and working towards an emancipatory, egalitarian, anti-caste politics today are called "anti-national," "urban Naxal," "urban Maoist" and other such epithets. Both the Congress and the BJP, in the past two decades, have attacked adherents of anti-caste politics using state instruments as well as thugs with political sanction.

The events of 5 August are merely another way to distract from and defer the long-overdue revolution of the real majority, which is another name for the birth of egalitarian politics in the subcontinent.

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KEYWORDS: religion(/tag/religion) Hinduism(/tag/hinduism) Hindutva(/tag/hindutva) RSS(/tag/rss) Indian National Congress(/tag/indian-national-congress) MK Gandhi(/tag/mk-gandhi) BR Ambedkar(/tag/br-ambedkar) The perversions of caste(/tag/the-perversions-of-caste)

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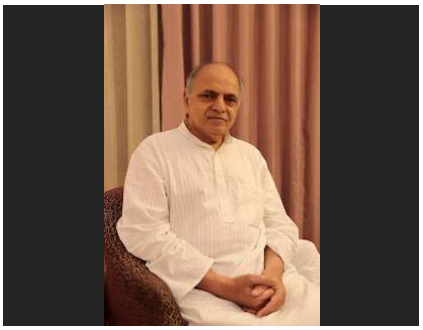

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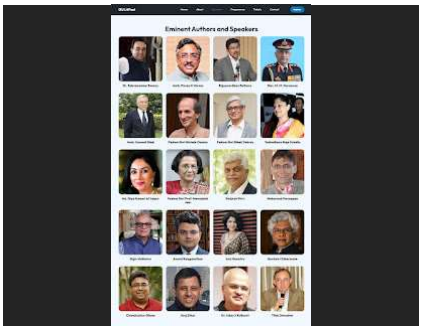

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